

Sebastião Salgado

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Brazil's leaders must take immediate action to save the country's indigenous peoples from a Covid-19 "genocide", a global coalition of artists, celebrities, scientists and intellectuals has said.

In an open letter to the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, figures including Madonna, Oprah Winfrey, Brad Pitt, David Hockney and Paul McCartney warned the pandemic meant indigenous communities in the Amazon faced "an extreme threat to their very survival".

"Five centuries ago, these ethnic groups were decimated by diseases brought by European colonisers ... Now, with this new scourge spreading rapidly across [Brazil](#) ... [they] may disappear completely since they have no means of combating Covid-19," they wrote.

The organiser of [the petition](#), the Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado, said trespassers including wildcat gold miners and illegal loggers must be expelled immediately from indigenous lands to stop them importing an illness that has killed more than 240,000 people around the world, including 6,750 in Brazil.

"We are on the eve of a genocide," Salgado, who has spent

nearly four decades documenting the Amazon and its inhabitants, told the Guardian.

Even before Covid-19, Brazil's indigenous peoples were locked in what activists call [a historic struggle for survival](#).

Critics accuse Bolsonaro, a far-right populist in power since January 2019, of stimulating [the invasion of indigenous reserves](#) and dismantling the government agencies supposed to protect them.

“Indigenous communities have never been so under attack ... The government has no respect at all for the indigenous territories,” Salgado said, pointing to crippling budget cuts and [the recent sacking](#) of several of top environmental officials who had targeted illegal prospectors and loggers.

But the letter said the pandemic had made an already bleak outlook under Bolsonaro even worse by paralysing what protection efforts remained

“As a result, there is nothing to protect indigenous peoples from the risk of genocide caused by an infection introduced by outsiders who enter their land illegally,” argued the signatories, who also include the supermodels Gisele Bündchen and Naomi Campbell, the author Mario Vargas Llosa, the artist Ai Weiwei, the architect Norman Foster and the actor Meryl Streep.

Salgado, who documented [Rwanda's 1994 genocide](#), warned that the 300,000 indigenous people in the Brazilian Amazon faced annihilation.

“In Rwanda we saw a violent genocide, an attack, where

people were physically killed. What will happen in Brazil will also mean the death of the indigenous,” said the 76-year-old who has spent the last seven years [photographing the region](#) for his final major project.

“When you endorse or encourage an act that you know will eliminate a population or part of a population, this is the definition of genocide ... [It will be] genocide because we know this is going to happen, we are facilitating ... the entry of coronavirus ... [and therefore] permission is being given for the death of these indigenous people.”

“It would mean the extinction of Brazil’s indigenous peoples,” Salgado added.

Fears Covid-19 could devastate indigenous communities grew last month when the [death of a Yanomami teenager](#) revived horrific memories of epidemics caused by roadbuilders and gold prospectors in the 1970s and 80s.

Sebastião Salgado: ‘[Allowing coronavirus to enter Amazon communities] would mean the extinction of Brazil’s indigenous peoples.’ Photograph: David Fernandez/EPA

“In some of the villages I knew measles killed 50% of the population. If Covid does the same thing it would be a massacre,” said Carlo Zazuini , an Italian missionary who has spent decades working with the Yanomami.

The Brazilian city so far [worst hit by coronavirus](#) is Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, the state where part of the Yanomami reserve is located.

Salgado – who is calling for the creation of an army-led

taskforce to evict intruders from protected areas – admitted Bolsonaro would not act of his own volition. But he believed international pressure could force the government to do so, as happened last year when global outrage resulted in the military being deployed to extinguish [fires in the Amazon](#).

“Just in the Brazilian Amazon we have 103 indigenous groups which have never been contacted – they represent humanity’s pre-history,” Salgado said. “We cannot allow all of this to disappear.”